

Fire support for the special operations task force

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Today's special operations forces joint fires element program was born out of successful rotations of dedicated field artillery captains and sergeants first class to fill joint manning document positions. Early in Operation Enduring Freedom, special operations task forces recognized the need for resident expertise within their headquarters to coordinate and integrate fire support. Successes in Operation Enduring Freedom led planners for Operation Iraqi Freedom to take on a similar staffing approach in their operations for the combined joint special operations task forces in Iraq.

In 2003, Combined Joint Special Operations Task Forces-West had resounding success integrating joint fires because of their joint fires element. These successes prompted coordination between the U.S. Army Forces Command, U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, Fort Bragg, N.C., and the field artillery branch at Human Resources Command, Alexandria, Va. The result was a formal proof of concept that started the test bed at the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) in October 2004.

Selection. In late 2004, the field artillery selected three captains and a major to help establish a new special operations forces joint fires element in the 7th Special

Forces Group (Airborne). The addition of these four officers was the final complement of personnel to the three sergeants first class and a chief warrant officer three, who already had deployed as part of 7th Group's inaugural rotation to Afghanistan and had gained invaluable experience that would shape the way the joint fires element would support special forces groups.

To prepare them for their assignments to 7th Group, the field artillery required the officers to attend the Joint Firepower Course at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., and the Joint Air Tasking Order Process Course at Hurlburt Field, Fla, in an effort to get the joint fires element started correctly.

Special operations forces joint fires element formal education. The Joint Firepower Course is a two-week course that teaches joint concepts, procedures and techniques for integrating air and surface weapons from all services. The course focuses on planning at the battalion through corps levels and coordinating joint air-ground operations within the Theater Air Control System and the Army Air-Ground System. The course places additional emphasis on joint combat airspace management and Army airspace command and control, which are crucial for special operations forces joint fires element operations.

The Joint Air Tasking Order Process Course is a three-week course that focuses on specific battle management functions to integrate air and surface resources into joint combat operations.

The course provides an understanding of coordination considerations performed primarily at the joint air operations center and associated joint and component facilities. Understanding the air tasking order process and how it supports the ground forces enables the fire support officer and NCO to use the system better to aid the commander and his staff during mission planning.

The Special Operations Terminal Attack Controller Course is a three-week course at Yuma Proving Grounds, Ariz., and is taught by the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School. This course trains personnel in the tactical and technical skills, and operational procedures necessary to effectively utilize rotary-wing and fixed-wing close air support assets in support of special operations forces missions. Personnel train on the capabilities and limitations of U.S. aircraft, munitions, lasers and ground marking equipment, and night and urban close air support. Upon completion of all required training, that includes a minimum of 12 live aircraft controls, the student earns the designation of joint terminal attack controller.

Fire support mission. The mission of the special operations forces joint fires element is similar to a fire support element at the brigade and division levels. The special operations forces joint fires element coordinates primarily with all forms of joint fire support into special operations forces operations. This includes, but is not limited to, close air support; rotary-

wing attack aviation; U.S. and coalition forces conventional ground-based fires, radars, target acquisition and electronic warfare assets; nonstandard intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; platform integration; naval surface fire support; and terminal guidance operations. In addition to coordinating and synchronizing fires, the special operations forces joint fires element is the primary agent for training fire support to Special Forces personnel.

Garrison training. Fire support training in garrison is another demand competing with all of the other tasks and missions that special forces battalions or companies have to address. It is essential that the joint fires element incorporates fire support training at whatever level possible to maximize exposure. Training opportunities for fire support range from classes on close air support, call for fire, and incorporating artillery and mortar live fire into company level direct action missions.

Each of the battalion's 18 Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha will require introductory and continuing training on fire support tasks. Since 18-series personnel come from a variety of backgrounds within the Army, the level of proficiency and familiarity with fire support can vary greatly between teams.

The limiting factor in all training is time. It is the most valuable resource and should not be squandered. Fire support training must be incorporated for the battalion and group into operations as much as possible. Each battalion will have ongoing missions, both stateside and within the regionally aligned countries, for that specific group. Along with those missions are deployments to the two major theaters of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Southern Command. 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) has worked with the Colombian military for many years. The addition of the special operations forces joint fires element has not only benefited the special forces groups, but also has enhanced the long-standing relationships with regional partners. For instance, the 1st Battalion Joint Fires Element worked closely with elements of a Colombian special forces brigade. The brigade commander wanted his mortar platoon to

train on fire support planning and mortar live fire; the task fell upon the shoulders of the joint fires element. After coordinating with the partnered Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha and Colombian army leadership, a program of instruction was developed and executed. The program more closely integrated the mortar platoon into fires planning for the platoon's assigned mission. A live-fire exercise served as the capstone event.

Another example of integrated training between the Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha and the Colombian military was a joint fires training exercise that 3rd Battalion conducted by in July 2005, and involved the first AC-130 live fire training in Colombia.

Combat fire support execution. Counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan or Iraq require U.S. special forces to array themselves in many small firebases with their host nation partners across a large operational area. This dispersion, coupled with the small unit formations, in which special operations forces operate, increases their requirements for joint fire support assets. The special operations forces joint fires element helps special operations task forces plan, coordinate, synchronize and integrate this fire support into the special operations forces' scheme of maneuver.

One example of this was the coordination and joint planning that resulted in two Canadian M777, 155-mm howitzer sections being placed in direct support of the special operations task forces operating in southern Afghanistan for more than 30 days. U.S. special forces and an Afghan battalion established a temporary operating base in northern Kandahar to conduct long-range patrols across an area with little to no Coalition presence. U.S. special forces and Afghan forces were to operate outside of the habitual footprint of coalition ground-based fire support systems. The joint fires element coordinated with the Canadian task force headquarters to deliver the necessary indirect fire support. These howitzers provided both lethal and nonlethal fires to Operational Detachments-Alpha and Afghan forces. Daily, these howitzers engaged targets for U.S. special forces and Afghan patrols. As

the operation progressed, the firebase began to receive frequent mortar attacks, possibly due to the effectiveness of the Canadian howitzers. In response, the Canadian task force provided a lightweight counter mortar radar. The radar allowed the Canadian fire direction center to translate point of origin data into fire missions quickly, resulting in an effective counterfire system.

U.S. special forces elements also conducted operations in United Kingdom controlled provinces. When these teams made contact with enemy forces, they received support from both United Kingdom light howitzers and Guided Multiple-Rocket Launch Systems. The responsibility to integrate these assets also fell on the joint fires element. Because of routine face-to-face and telephonic coordination by the joint fires elements with the United Kingdom task force, timely deconfliction of fires through layers of command and control was possible. This resulted in the rapid clearance of fires and fire mission approval for U.S. special forces elements.

The Combined Joint Special Operations Task Forces-Afghanistan also has U.S. M119 howitzer systems in direct support of U.S. special forces at firebases in southern and eastern Afghanistan. These howitzers proved invaluable during troops-in-contact situations, providing counterfire, high explosive and illumination fires. This has become an enduring relationship, continuing for almost three years and multiple unit rotations. Howitzer sections in support of U.S. special forces often fired more rounds than all of their combined counterparts who were supporting conventional units in Operation Enduring Freedom. Also, Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha routinely use their own organic mortar systems (60-mm, 81-mm, 120-mm) in support of their own combat operations. In Operation Enduring Freedom, 120-mm mortars are located at many of the U.S. special forces firebases and used to extend the indirect fire range of an Operational Detachment-Alpha in excess of seven kilometers. They use these systems, not only as a part of base camp defense, but, also, as a part of their basic loads during mounted combat patrols.

Each Special Forces Operational

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Detachment-Alpha has a joint terminal attack controller, and it is the joint fires element's responsibility to receive and process all air support requests for close air support and electronic warfare assets from all joint terminal attack controllers within the special operations task force. The joint fires element tracks all air support requests from submission by the joint terminal attack controller through the air tasking order process. If the request is supported, the joint fires element informs the joint terminal attack controller about mission-related data such as aircraft type, call signs and time on station. Close air support accounts for the vast majority of fire support assets provided to a Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha due to the distances required and the limited availability of the other fire support platforms. For example, one special operations task force was supported with more than 500 pre-planned, non-troops-in-contact close air support sorties during an eight-month tour in Afghanistan.

Most of what has been described takes place within the operations center on the forward operating base. However, there are several missions that required the joint fires element to operate in the field, directly supporting Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha at their firebases. The following vignettes describe some of the events that took place in a joint fires element during combat rotations.

Two Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha were assigned to a firebase in one of Afghanistan's most contested provinces and were engaged

consistently by enemy forces whenever leaving the patrol base. The joint fires element proposed moving a 105-mm howitzer platoon from a relatively quiet firebase to this firebase to provide immediate fire support to the Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha. The fire support NCO assessed the firebase to determine whether or not the firing platoon could operate within the confines of the relatively small firebase and whether or not the Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha could support this addition.

Once it was determined that the firebase could sustain the additional unit, the joint fires element submitted a request to move a firing platoon to the firebase, and it was approved by the joint task force commander. The fire support officer conducted initial training and coordination between the firing platoon and the Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha at the firebase. The training included several live-fire missions while accompanying the Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha on combat patrols. The Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha became extremely proficient using their new fire support assets, and the lethality and overall effectiveness of that team significantly improved.

As qualified joint terminal attack controllers, the fire support officer and fire support NCO sometimes were called upon to augment the Air Force joint terminal attack controllers. In one such instance, the fire support officer provided joint terminal attack controller coverage for a Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha for 30 days because there was a

delay with the Air Force joint terminal attack controller's replacement. During this time, the fire support officer conducted combat operations with the Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha and requested and employed fixed-wing close air support and rotary-wing close combat attack assets into several firefights.

One other situation where having qualified joint terminal attack controllers within the special operations task force operations center proved invaluable was during the typical use of armed Predators to engage high-value individuals. This process involved watching the Predator video feed and communicating with the aircrew via My Internet Relay Chat while the special operations task force commander watched and provided constant feedback and guidance.

Operational Detachments-Alphas and -Bravos often work directly with the U.S. embassies in the country where they operate or train. Also, the battalion fire support officer can serve in an effects coordinator role on an Operational Detachment-Bravo staff within an embassy. Effects coordination for an Operational Detachment-Bravo or special forces battalion is vastly different from any conventional battalion or brigade because it requires working closely with the Department of State and many other government agencies. This requires an in-depth knowledge of joint and interagency capabilities and limitations to ensure the commander's desired effects are understood by all agencies involved in the region.

A direct example of this type of work occurred during the summer of 2006



An M119A2 crew from 3-319th Field Artillery Regiment (Airborne) puts rounds downrange in support of a Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha as a part of operations in southern Afghanistan in early 2005. (Photo courtesy of MSG Daniel M. Orr, U.S. Army)



A vehicle modified by the Afghan National Security Forces to fill the role of an indirect fire platform. (Photo by MAJ Deric Holbrook, U.S. Army)

when the 2nd Battalion fire support officer served as the effects coordinator at the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá, Colombia. During this deployment, the fire support officer worked with every agency in the embassy and gained approval from the U.S. ambassador to establish a joint interagency working group. This group was designed to facilitate intelligence and operations fusion for the embassy and the Operational Detachment-Bravo commander in support of the American hostage rescue in Colombia. Effect coordination was critical for this interagency and special operations specific mission. The special operations forces joint fires element fire support officer was integral to ensuring the commander achieved his desired effects.

There is a higher level of responsibility and expectations of a captain or a sergeant first class assigned to a special operations forces joint fires element. The joint fires element must coordinate fire support operations for a division-sized area of operations. He has 18 subordinate elements with joint terminal attack controllers who depend on his ability to plan and coordinate fire support assets for each of them. The joint fires element must have access to more intelligence and joint fire support assets than a typical conventional battalion or brigade combat team; and he must be able to manage it all concurrently 24 hours a day.

Operations Command at Fort Bragg, N.C. He was the first fire support officer assigned to 1st Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), Fort Bragg. He also was a qualified joint terminal attack controller, and deployed with 1st Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Previously, he served as a battalion fire support officer and headquarters and service battery commander for 1st Battalion, 82nd Field Artillery at Fort Hood, Texas. He was a platoon leader, battery and battalion fire direction officer for 1st Battalion, 6th Field Artillery, 1st Infantry Division, and a company fire support officer for 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division while stationed in Germany. He is a graduate of the Command and General Staff College and holds a master's degree in International Relations from Webster University.

Major Deric J. Holbrook, field artillery, is currently serving as the battalion operations officer for 2-12 Field Artillery, 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division forward deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He recently served as a Stryker Brigade Combat Team fire support officer. Major Holbrook was the first fire support officer assigned to 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), Fort Bragg, N.C. He was a qualified joint terminal attack controller, and deployed with 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) in support of Operation Enduring Freedom – Afghanistan and Operation Enduring Freedom – Caribbean and Central America. He also served as the battalion assistant S3 operations officer, battalion fire direction officer and as a battery/

maneuver commander for 1st Battalion, 7th Field Artillery (Schweinfurt, Germany) in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Major Holbrook began his Army career with the 25th Infantry Division (Light) Hawaii where he served as an aviation brigade fire support officer, battalion fire support officer, company fire support officer, platoon leader and platoon fire direction officer. He is a graduate of the Command and General Staff College and holds a master's degree in International Relations from Webster University.

Major Jason D. Adams, field artillery, is currently the deputy fire support coordinator for 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry). He was the first fire support officer assigned to 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), Fort Bragg, N.C. He also was a qualified joint terminal attack controller and deployed with 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. He served as the battalion fire direction officer for 1st Battalion (Airborne), 321st Field Artillery and commander of C Battery, 1st Battalion (Airborne), 321st Field Artillery at Fort Bragg. He was a Stryker platoon leader, assistant brigade fire support officer for 2nd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division and counter fire liaison officer to the V Republic of Korea Corps, while stationed at Camp Hovey, Republic of Korea. Major Adams served as a company fire support officer with A Company, 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment and the battery fire direction officer and executive officer for C Battery (Airborne), 4th Battalion, 11th Field Artillery at Fort Richardson, Alaska.

Major Seth Knazovich, field artillery, is currently assigned to Headquarters, U.S. Army Special